Doing our homework

A guide for discussions

Alberta's Commission on Learning

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Submitting your Workbook

Please mail the completed questions section of the workbook to Alberta's Commission on Learning at the address above. The deadline for workbook submissions is December 6, 2002.

Additional Copies

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Doing our homework

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Each September, classrooms across the province get back in full swing. Going back to school is something we all remember – the excitement of new supplies, meeting new and old friends, learning new things, and starting a fresh new year.

But a lot has changed and will continue to change in Alberta's schools. There are new challenges on the horizon and it's important to look ahead, anticipate those changes, and take action now to set a clear direction for the future. Alberta's Commission on Learning has been set up to do just that – to prepare for the future.

Alberta's education system is known as one of the best in Canada and some would say, among the best in the world. That's the result of hard work and strong commitment from Alberta's teachers, administrators, parents, trustees, community members, and of course, the students themselves.

At the same time, we know there are challenges in today's classrooms. Information on the following pages highlights some of those challenges and poses important questions.

Alberta's Commission on Learning wants to hear your views. This is the first time the education system has undergone a major review in about 30 years. And it's important we begin by "doing our homework" – learning as much as we can and listening to Albertans as a starting point for discussing ideas, setting priorities, and exploring solutions. Most importantly, we want to hear your views on where the education system should be headed in the future, what your expectations are, what's working well and needs to be maintained, and what isn't working as well and needs to be changed.

This workbook provides some basic information about the education system. It highlights some, but certainly not all, of the issues. And it poses a set of questions. It also leaves room for you to add other issues or ideas you want to bring to the Commission's attention.

We encourage people to use this workbook to guide your discussion of the issues and your presentations and submissions to the Commission. Information on the inside cover of this workbook describes how you can submit your views or make a presentation at one of our upcoming meetings across the province.

Thank you for taking the time to get involved in this review. Education is important to all of us, and your views are essential to help shape the future of education in Alberta.

Alberta's Commission on Learning

A snapshot of Alberta's learning system

It's impossible to describe the scope and diversity of Alberta's learning system in a few short paragraphs. But it's also important to begin with a common understanding of some key points.

Schools, students and teachers

- Every child has the right to education.
- Public education is provided to all students under 20 years of age to the end of Grade 12.
- In 2001-02, more than 590,000 students were enrolled in kindergarten to Grade 12.
- Students aged 6 - 16 are legally required to attend school. Kindergarten is optional, but 95% of eligible children attend kindergarten.
- As of July 2002, there were 2,045 schools in the province including 1,375 public schools, 318 separate schools, 193 private schools, 23 Francophone schools, 10 charter schools and 126 early childhood operators.
- Tens of thousands of people work in the school system including more than 36,000 teachers.
- Alberta's learning system offers a lot of choice from public and separate schools to charter schools, private schools, alternative programs, home schooling, blended or virtual programs. There are also a variety of choices within the public and separate systems themselves. Parents choose different schools for different reasons - some because of religious or cultural reasons, others because the programs specialize in academics, sports or languages.
- The minimum required instructional time for the year depends on the student's grade level. Minimum required instructional time range from 475 hours a year for kindergarten students to 950 hours a year for students in Grades 2 - 9 and 1,000 hours for Grade 10 - 12 students.
- Wherever possible, students with special needs, including those with mild, moderate or severe disabilities, those with behavior problems and those who are gifted and talented, are integrated into regular classrooms. The number of students identified with special needs is growing. In the past five years, the overall student population grew by 5%. The number of students identified with severe disabilities increased by 64% and the number of students with mild and moderate disabilities increased by 140%. There currently are over 93,000 students identified with special needs in Alberta's schools.
- All teachers must have an Alberta teaching certificate. To teach in Alberta, teachers require a university degree in education. Programs range from 4-6 years.
- Alberta's teachers must meet high standards. Alberta has a teaching quality standard in place outlining guidelines for professional knowledge, skills and attributes.

Curriculum, standards and results

- Grades 1 to 12 are designed to help Alberta students become knowledgeable, healthy, self-reliant, and contributing members of society.

- The province has a centralized curriculum developed by Alberta Learning with the help of teachers and experts and approved by the Minister of Learning. Provincial standards are set for all subjects and grades.

- The requirements of a basic education have been outlined and approved by the provincial government. The core program includes language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. In addition, the fine arts, career and technology studies, health, physical education, second languages, and religious education (in separate and some other schools) are also included.

- To receive a high school diploma, students must complete a full range of compulsory core subjects as well as optional courses that broaden their skills and knowledge. Examples of optional courses include career and technology studies, trades training, second language or fine arts courses.

- To measure how well standards are being met, students in Grades 3, 6 and 9 write province-wide achievement tests. Students in Grade 12 write province-wide diploma exams in core subject areas; diploma exams count for 50% of a student's final mark in those subjects.

- Results of achievement tests, diploma exams and international tests show that Alberta's students are performing well. In national and international tests, Alberta students are consistently at or near the top.

- The provincial high school completion rate (within five years of entering Grade 10) has increased from 72% in 1999/2000 to 73% in 2000/01 and is moving towards the province's goal of 75% by 2005. Statistics Canada information shows that by the time Albertans are between 25 and 34 years of age about 90% have completed high school. This is slightly above the national average of 89%.

Stakeholders and governance

- A number of different players - often called stakeholders - are involved in education including students, parents, teachers, school boards, government, post-secondary institutions, taxpayers, unions, business and industry leaders, and other community members.

- The provincial government is responsible for setting overall direction and goals, setting curriculum and standards, developing achievement and diploma exams and ensuring that standards are met, working with stakeholders, and funding the learning system.

- School boards are responsible for the actual delivery of education in schools across the province. They employ teachers and support staff, allocate resources, supervise schools, set policy direction for administration and teachers, and address the local needs of their communities. School board trustees are elected every three years.

- About a decade ago, the number of school boards in the province was reduced from 141 to 62.

- Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. Learning starts at birth and in the home. Parents are also encouraged to take an active part in the education of children at school. Every school is required to have a parent school council.

- Teachers are responsible for what happens in their classrooms. They prepare lessons, teach students, address unique needs, and mark exams and papers. They also participate in decisions about school policy and in professional development programs and courses. They undertake extra-curricular activities such as coaching sports teams, arranging special clubs, or planning and supervising school events.

- All teachers, including principals and many district office staff are required to be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Funding the learning system

- About one quarter of all government spending goes to education.

- For 2001-02, the provincial budget for kindergarten to Grade 12, public and separate school boards, including charter schools and home schooling, was approximately $3.5 billion. In 2002-03, provincial funding will increase by about 4% or $139 million.

- Funding for school construction, modernizing and upgrading is provided separately by Alberta Infrastructure. Over $1 billion will be spent by the provincial government between 2001 to 2004 for upgrading, modernizing and building new schools. About 75% of Alberta's schools are more than 25 years old.

- Since 1995, funding for education has grown from $2.4 billion to $3.5 billion. When discounted for inflation and enrolment increases, this is an increase of 18.7%. Enrolment in schools grew by about 6% in the same period. If we go back to 1993 and include the years when funding reductions were made, the overall increase since 1993 is 6.8%.

- Funding for special education has more than doubled from $158 million in 1995-96 to about $336 million in 2002-03. Special education students are funded through a combination of block funding based on the number of special education students reported by school jurisdictions and per student funding for students with more severe disabilities.

- The provincial government allocates funds to school boards based on a formula. The formula takes a number of factors into account including the number of students (for Grades 1 - 10), the number of courses taken by students in Grades 11 - 12, the incidence rates of students with special needs, the type of programs offered, and the geographic location and other characteristics of the jurisdiction. School boards are not allowed to spend more than 4 - 6% of this funding on administration. The formula has been in place since 1995 and is currently under review.

Funding the learning system continued...

- School boards decide how much money each school gets. They allocate money to pay for staff salaries and benefits, purchase books and equipment, pay for utilities and regular maintenance, and generally keep the schools running. Almost three quarters of their spending goes to instruction, with the majority going to pay for salaries and benefits.

- School boards used to be able to requisition taxes from their local property owners, but in 1994, the province decided that all residential and non-residential property taxes should be pooled and distributed equitably across the province. Separate school boards have a constitutional right to opt-out of the pooling and tax their own residents. School boards can ask their residents to approve a special levy of up to 3% of their budget for a year. Several school boards have proposed a special levy but none have been approved by community members to date. About 36% of funding for education comes from residential and non-residential property taxes while 64% comes from general revenues of the province.

- Accredited private schools receive 60% of the per student funding provided to public schools for basic instruction. They do not receive funding to build new schools or renovate existing ones or to cover transportation costs, administration or plant operations, nor maintenance of schools (except for Early Childhood Services (ECS) and designated special education private schools). Any funding for these initiatives would have to come from other revenue sources such as tuition fees. Registered private schools that are not accredited do not receive any funding from Alberta Learning.

- Local school boards, or school principals in consultation with a school council, can establish fees for alternative programs and for instructional supplies and materials like locker rentals, school planners and computer diskettes. Fees for the 2000/01 school year were approximately $59 per student and ranged from $0 to $182.

- Parents and schools can choose to fundraise for extras such as band trips or special school equipment. The Alberta School Boards Association's fundraising policy sets out guidelines for appropriate fundraising.

Drivers of Change

The Commission's work focuses on preparing for the future - identifying pressure points and new challenges ahead and recommending new approaches and solutions.

These are some of the challenges ahead. We're interested in your views on these challenges as well as your ideas on other challenges that may be on the horizon.

Technology

Technology has an impact on every aspect of our lives. The Internet is growing faster than all other technologies before it, including radio and television. By the end of 2001, more than 500 million people were using the Internet and the users are getting younger. Today, five-year-old children may have better computer literacy skills than many adults.

Using computers, different types of technology and the Internet to access the latest information has become a part of the way people work and do business. In schools, students have access to computers and use them as part of their studies, but access varies from school to school. Across the province, the average is one computer for every six students.

Technology opens up a world of possibilities for students, allowing them to access the latest information, take some of their courses on-line, and interact with other students around the world. It also benefits teachers by providing greater access to online resources, online distance learning and video-conference classrooms. Parents also benefit from technology through online access to a wide variety of learning resources that help them understand 'what' and 'how' their children are learning and help with homework assignments. Technology provides parents who are home schooling their children with additional tools and support. Technology also opens up possibilities for schools and students in smaller, more remote communities where it may be difficult to access a full range of courses and programs.

Some people suggest that more needs to be done to teach students how to harness computer skills so they are well prepared for the world of work and future studies, not to mention being able to use technology responsibly as part of their everyday lives. On the other hand, some say that there is too much emphasis on computers in schools, especially in the younger grades.

Population and immigration

The face of Alberta's population is changing as more people from other provinces and countries come to Alberta. Close to 143,000 people moved to Alberta between 1996 and 2001, in large part because of our strong economy. Alberta also is home to an increasing number of immigrants, many of whom have English as their second language. Close to 36,000 students are in English as a second language programs.

Alberta has a significant proportion of Aboriginal students and the population of Aboriginal people is growing faster than the rest of the population. Statistics Canada information indicates that First Nations, Métis and Inuit people make up about 6% of Alberta's population today. By 2016, the Aboriginal population is expected to reach 7%. Close to half of Alberta's Aboriginal population is under the age of 20. That means a significant proportion of the population is actually school-aged.

In spite of increasing numbers of people coming to Alberta, we expect the number of school-aged children to decline by 12% by 2018. This will undoubtedly have an impact on Alberta's schools. School boards may face situations where they have fewer students in some schools while others, especially those in newer areas, may be overcrowded. With an aging population, fewer people will have children in school and be actively involved in the school system. They may have other priorities for provincial action and funding including improving health care, fixing roads and highways, or improving infrastructure in cities.

Alberta's population also is becoming more urban. More than 80% of Alberta's population lives in urban areas while the number of people in rural Alberta is declining. This may make it even more difficult for smaller, rural communities to maintain their schools, and be able to provide their students with a well-rounded, high quality education. Options such as using technology or other types of virtual learning to bring education to rural and remote classrooms may become more common in the future.

Alberta's economy and globalization

One of the key objectives of Alberta's education system is to prepare young people for the world of work. Alberta has a strong economy but there are areas where there are growing shortages of skilled workers. Suggestions are that 150,000 new jobs will be created between 2002 and 2010 and 60% of those jobs will require some form of post-secondary training. Alberta's economy and economies around the world are also becoming more knowledge based. That means there is a greater emphasis on technology and the development of new knowledge, ideas, and products. To meet the challenges of today's workplace and an increasingly global marketplace, Alberta's young people have to be well-prepared, with strong skills, creative minds and a willingness to keep learning and upgrading their skills. More students will need to complete high school and go on to post-secondary education in order to be prepared for the jobs of the future.

Classroom challenges

All of these issues and trends will have an impact on Alberta's classrooms. In the past, we've heard a lot about class size, about the composition and mix of students in a class, and about the challenge teachers face in trying to keep pace not only with the needs of their students but also the expectations of parents, school boards, and society as a whole.

Quite often, people look at any number of issues - from health to behaviour and lifestyles, social development, religious education, promoting the arts and culture, citizenship and community participation - and expect the schools to address them all ... and to do it on top of ensuring that students also meet high educational standards. What reasonable and realistic expectations should be set for our schools as we prepare for the future?

Sustainability

One of the key challenges is to ensure that Alberta's education system is sustainable in the future. Costs are increasing, including the costs of teacher salaries and benefits, other staff salaries and benefits, teacher aides and other special supports for students, textbooks and supplies, and even basic utilities. Provincial funding has increased as well. But in spite of these increases, some suggest that we're not spending enough. Others worry that we will not be able to afford the costs of education in the future.

There is no easy answer to the question, "How much is enough?" But Albertans, teachers, parents, school boards and the provincial government want assurances that we'll be able to afford the costs in the future without compromising the quality of education.

Focusing on key areas

The Commission was asked to address seven key areas. The following sections highlight some of the issues in each of those areas and pose some questions for people to think about. The questions at the end of this workbook correspond to many of the questions in this section.

Excellence in the classroom

Clearly, this is the goal for everyone in the education system. And there are many positive signs. The key question is: What are the critical factors that contribute to excellence in the classroom and which ones are most important?

There are a number of factors that influence student learning.

- Research consistently shows that school leadership and well-prepared teachers working together have the most influence on student success. What needs to be done to ensure strong leadership in schools? Alberta's teachers are well-prepared and meet high standards. But is there more that should be done to provide ongoing professional development? Should formal training be required for teachers who want to become principals?

- Some people suggest that the best investment to improve quality in the classroom is to reduce class sizes so teachers can spend more time with individual students. Others argue that this is a costly measure with limited results. Both sides of this debate point to studies to support their view. While there is little agreement on the average number of students in a classroom, Statistics Canada information for 1998-99 puts Alberta's average pupil-teacher ratio (comparing all staff with teaching certificates to all students) at 16.8, slightly higher than the Canadian average of 15.9. A January 2002 study based on a province-wide class size survey showed an average of 19.7 students in kindergarten and 23.6 students in Grades 1 to 6. About 6% of classes had more than 30 students. What these averages don't show is the fact that class sizes vary greatly across the province. How important is it to reduce class sizes across the province? Is this the best way of achieving excellence?

- Some also suggest that it isn't just the size of the class that matters but the composition of the class and the needs of the students. Should we look at the composition of today's classrooms in terms of the mix of different students with different needs? What should be done to ensure that both teachers and students get adequate support and that students' needs are met?

- Teachers are critical to every child's success. Their duties include teaching in the classroom, preparing lessons, marking tests and assignments, talking with parents, colleagues and specialists, and supervising students. In addition, they frequently are involved in organizing extra-curricular activities. Should extra-curricular activities be formally recognized as part of a teacher's role and responsibilities? What activities should be considered part of a teacher's responsibilities and which ones should be considered 'extras'?

- Teachers' roles are also expanding and becoming more complex. Especially in smaller and northern communities, teachers are expected not only to teach but also to provide counselling, address health-related issues, and get involved in social and community issues affecting students. How should these growing and increasingly complex roles and responsibilities be recognized and supported?

- Research also shows that parental involvement in a child's education is the best predictor of success. What more could schools do to invite and support parental involvement?

There are lots of other factors that have an impact on excellence in the classroom including the amount of face-to-face teaching time students receive, the length of the school year, and the kind of support teachers have in the classroom including teacher aides, specialists, etc. How do we sort through these various factors and focus on what's most important?

The changing student

Alberta's classrooms today have a rich and diverse blend of students with different backgrounds, languages, cultures, abilities, expectations and learning needs.

As noted earlier, Alberta has a significant proportion of Aboriginal children. While considerable efforts have been made by Aboriginal educators, schools and communities to adapt programs and meet the needs of Aboriginal children, the fact remains that the educational success of these children needs to be dramatically improved. In 1996, the high school graduation rate for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners was 15% less than those individuals who did not report Aboriginal ancestry on the census. About 4% of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners completed university compared to about 14% of those who did not report Aboriginal ancestry on the census.

The number and percentage of children identified with special needs is also increasing. The majority of these students are integrated into regular classrooms with support from a variety of aides and programs. This is strongly supported by parents of children with special needs and by education experts. On the other hand, concerns have been expressed that there isn't enough support for these children in the classroom and that has an impact on other students in the class. Others suggest that there should be more flexibility in providing options for special needs students.

The changing student continued...

We also know that Alberta society if changing and so is the nature of families. There are more families where both parents work and more single parent families as well. In addition, about 13% of Alberta's children live in a low-income situation. These children often have needs that extend beyond what would typically be included as a school's responsibility. However, the social environment of children affects their life in school as well. It means teachers and principals often spend time dealing with complex social issues and trying to link students to additional support outside the school.

Most schools actively encourage the active participation of parents. This is an important way of linking parents with the education of their children. At the same time, schools are increasingly dependent on the work of parent volunteers. There also are some concerns that it is difficult to meet the expectations some parents have for their children and their schools.

The challenge is how to meet the needs of all of these different students. Is more support from teaching aides and specially trained staff the answer? Should there be better links between the school and other social and health agencies involved in addressing the diverse needs of children and families? What needs to be done to make the integration of students with different needs more effective for the children, their teachers, and other students in the class?

Smooth transitions

The days of quitting school and getting a good job, rising to the top, and staying there for an entire career are long gone. The days of students making their way in the world without a good education are gone. The majority of new jobs in the future will require some post-secondary education. Students who lack skills when they leave school pay a high price and have a difficult time getting anything but the most basic jobs. We also know there are shortages in certain areas of the workforce, especially in highly skilled trades and the health sector.

More students are staying in school and going on to post-secondary education. While most complete high school in three years, about a quarter of students don't complete high school within four years. For Aboriginal students, the percentage is much higher.

How do we encourage students not only to stay in school, but also to make the most of their studies, go on to post-secondary education, or enter the workforce with a clear idea that they need to keep on learning in order to succeed? What responsibilities do parents, families and individual students have? Should more be done to encourage students to enter certain fields such as the trades, technologies or health care? Are we expecting students to make decisions too early or is it appropriate for them to get a head start on their future careers?

There are other transitions that students face as well - transitions from early childhood programs to Grade 1, from the elementary grades to junior high school, and from junior high to high school. Programs are in place to provide early support to disabled children as young as 2 1/2 years and other programs are in place to identify and assist children in high-risk families or with special health needs. Because good literacy skills are so important for future learning, a variety of programs are in place to support literacy before children enter school and in the early grades.

Does more need to be done to ensure young children are well prepared for school or that there are smooth transitions at every point in a student's education? What role do parents play in preparing their children for school and deciding if they are ready to go to school? Decisions also are made about students progressing from one grade to the next even though, in some cases, they may not have mastered the skills and knowledge for that grade level. What measures should be used to decide whether a student moves on through the education system - their age, their academic skills, their social development, or a combination of these measures? Who should be involved in these decisions and what are the implications?

Clear expectations and a focus on results

A high percentage of students meet the province's standards for achievement tests and pass diploma exams. In addition, Alberta's students perform well compared to students in other provinces and in many parts of the world. We know our exam results are good. But what other measures do we have of the education system and its success? How should we measure factors other than student achievement that also are important in the success of students?

What do Albertans expect from the education system? What do parents, students and teachers expect? Have the expectations changed and do they need to change in the future? How do we balance growing expectations for schools to "do it all?"

Alberta also provides a lot of choice - students can go to public, separate, charter, private, alternative schools or they can be home schooled. Is choice good for Alberta's learning system? Does it provide the flexibility and opportunity to use different approaches to meet different students' needs? Does it provide a level of competition that helps improve educational services?

Clarifying roles, responsibilities and governance

Both the provincial government and school boards are responsible for governing and managing the education system. There is provincial control in some areas such as curriculum and testing, but school boards are responsible for organizing and delivering education programs and running schools on a day to day basis. Some changes have been made in the past and some suggest more changes should be made in how the education system is governed. Think about these issues.

- There are 62 school boards compared with 15 regional health authorities and 18 Child and Family Services authorities. Is the number of school boards appropriate or should the number be reduced?

- Currently, the education system is governed and managed by an array of different groups and individuals from the Minister of Learning and his department to school board trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers, staff and school councils. Often opinions vary about the needs of the education system, causing tensions to arise. What other governance models could be considered, what would the advantages be of alternative approaches, and would they result in better outcomes?

- Each of the various stakeholders has different roles to play. Are the responsibilities clear and if not, what changes should be made?

- Superintendents provide leadership for the entire school jurisdiction, but they also work directly for the school board, manage substantial budgets, and head the administration for the jurisdiction. Currently, they must be certificated teachers. Does it make sense to continue this requirement or should capable managers who are not teachers be able to manage a school district?

- All teachers, principals and certificated staff must be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association. It combines both union functions (bargaining for salaries) and professional functions (setting professional standards, codes of conduct, discipline). This is the most common model in Canada. However, British Columbia and Ontario have models where these functions are handled by two separate organizations and principals are not in the union. Should any changes be made to Alberta's model?

- School boards used to have the right to tax their local residents and business to support education. Now, the provincial government collects residential and non-residential education property taxes and redistributes them to school boards. On the one hand, people argue that allowing school boards to tax their residents gave wealthy areas an advantage - they were able to tax their residents more, pay their teachers more, and offer more programs to their students. The current situation is more equitable for students. On the other hand, others say that this took away school boards' ability to make their own decisions. It puts everyone on the same level and doesn't allow some to excel and do more if their residents feel it is important. Some also suggest that it's unfair for their residential and non-residential property tax dollars to go to support students in other parts of the province. Should school boards be given back the right to tax? If school boards are not allowed to raise taxes, should they continue to be elected?

- Some suggest that more funding is needed for Alberta's education system in order to meet students' needs. Currently, education is funded primarily from provincial funding and residential and non-residential education property taxes. Should the funding of education be based on property tax at all or from general revenue of the province? What changes should be made in how we fund the education system to ensure it is sustainable in the future?

Relevant and responsive curriculum

The provincial government sets the curriculum for all grades and subjects, working with teachers and other education experts and seeking input from parents, trustees, and a wide range of other individuals, experts and organizations. Most people agree that this provides consistency across the province and ensures that all students are learning the same standard of material.

Relevant and responsive curriculum continued...

The basic education program approved by the provincial government provides students with a solid core program, including language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. In addition, students also take fine arts, health, physical education, career and technology studies, and a variety of languages including French. Students must be able to meet the provincial graduation requirements and be prepared for entry into the workplace or post-secondary studies. Students are also expected to understand personal and community values and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They're expected to develop the capacity to pursue learning throughout their lives. Students also should have opportunities to learn languages other than English, understand other cultures, and to help prepare them for participation in the global economy.

Within each of the specific subject areas, it's difficult to keep up with changing demands. If curriculum doesn't change regularly, it gets outdated and Alberta's students lose out on new knowledge and the latest ideas and approaches. On the other hand, some teachers express concerns that curriculum is constantly changing and the need to keep up with constant changes puts added pressure on them.

We also know that people expect a lot from schools. The curriculum covers a broad range of topics, skills and attributes. Students are not just expected to know the content - they also have to be able to use the information, develop skills, become good citizens, have positive attitudes, and be ready to go on to post-secondary education, work and lifelong learning.

It's a tall order. How do we keep pace with an up-to-date curriculum in a world where new knowledge is doubling every two years, but not overload the schools with too much change and too much to do?

The future classroom

All of the issues we've outlined will have an impact on the classroom of the future. It has to meet all of those challenges and make sure all Alberta children continue to get the best education.

Looking to the future means being clear on our vision ... deciding on the kind of classroom we want in the future and taking action to make that vision a reality.

What is your vision for the future of Alberta's classrooms? Does it include more technology, more virtual connections, and more high tech approaches? Does it include more specialized studies focusing on the sciences or math or high skilled areas? Or does it include a more general approach where students get a balance of a wide range of areas? Do you envision schools operating much as they do today or perhaps as part of a network of health and social agencies working to focus on children's needs? Should schools be the focus in the community with community access to the libraries, gyms and meeting rooms? Should public and separate schools share certain facilities and infrastructure such as gyms, science labs, and heating systems? Do you see more choices, more private and alternative schools or programs? How do we address the diverse needs of Alberta's children and youth? What role do you see students, teachers, principals, parents, school boards, superintendents and governments playing in achieving that vision? What about the role of business, industry, labour and community leaders?

It's your turn.

The information we've provided is just the tip of the iceberg. The issues are complex and people certainly have different views of what they would like to see in Alberta's schools.

We'd like your views on a number of important topics and ideas. If you would like to provide ideas on other topics, we're certainly interested, but we'd like you to use the following questions as the basic starting point for your submissions and presentations.

Background information for each group of questions is available in this workbook, which may also be accessed online at www.learningcommission.gov.ab.ca. You may also complete the questions online or, if you prefer, write your responses below and submit them by fax or mail. See the inside cover for the address and fax number.

The information you share will be compiled with that of other Albertans. Only aggregate results will be reported. These will not be linked to individuals.

Comments and opinions submitted in response to this survey become property of Alberta's Commission on Learning (established by the Alberta Minister of Learning) and may be published or used at the discretion of the Commission. Permission of the author will be sought before any comments are published that may identify the individual or organization providing the comments.

Please consider the following questions, indicate your responses, and return them to the Commission on Learning at the address provided at the end of the workbook.

Alberta's future classroom

1. What is working well in today's education system? What are the major strengths that must be maintained?

2. **What aspects are not working as well? What are the major weaknesses?**

3. **What is your vision for the classroom of the future?** Try to be as specific as possible about what aspects it would include.

Expectations and results

4. **What are your expectations for schools in the future?** People frequently highlight preparation for post-secondary education or the workforce as priorities. But we also expect schools to prepare young people to be good citizens. We expect schools to reinforce good behaviour and respect for others and teach students to get along in a group. In fact, we expect a lot of our schools. **What can and should we reasonably expect from our schools? What should the top five priorities be?**

5. Alberta's school system provides choice for students and parents in many parts of the province while, in other areas, it is difficult to provide the same level of choice. **Does this diversity add to or detract from the central purpose of the public education system?**

6. Currently, students write province-wide student achievement tests in Grades 3, 6 and 9 and diploma exams for Grade 12 subjects. **Do you think province-wide testing should be done:**
(Please check the statement you agree with)

- ❑ In every grade
- ❑ In a few grades

Please circle the grades you think should have province-wide exams.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 Not at all

7. **What measures should be put in place to assess the performance of the school system in addition to student achievement?**

Excellence in the classroom

8. There are a number of factors that affect excellence in the classroom. **What priority would you give to the following factors?** Please rank them in priority of 1 - 10 with 1 being the highest priority.

___ Effective leadership by the principal

___ Fewer students in the classroom

___ Well-trained and effective teachers

___ Access to more support from education experts and counsellors to assess and meet students' needs

___ Better networks of support outside the school including family counsellors, social agencies and health authorities

___ Adequate facilities and equipment such as textbooks, computers, etc.

___ More classroom time for students

___ Extra-curricular activities

___ More active involvement of parents

___ High standards in the curriculum

9. **People have suggested a number of ways of continually improving schools' performance. Consider the following statements and indicate whether you agree or disagree with them.**
Circle 1 if you strongly agree and 5 if you strongly disagree. Circle 3 if you don't know or don't have a view on the issue.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers should be expected to upgrade their skills regularly through professional development and courses.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers' performance should be assessed on an ongoing basis.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers should have more preparation time.

1 2 3 4 5 The time teachers put in to support extra-curricular activities should be considered part of their regular duties.

1 2 3 4 5 The time teachers spend on extra-curricular activities should be recognized through additional pay or additional time off.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers should be paid on the basis of merit, not just their years of education and experience.

1 2 3 4 5 Kindergarten should be extended to a full day.

1 2 3 4 5 Kindergarten should be mandatory.

1 2 3 4 5 Kindergarten should be extended to full days for special needs children.

1 2 3 4 5 The length of the school year or school day should be increased.

1 2 3 4 5 Alberta should set a maximum for the number of students in the classroom, especially for the lower grades.

1 2 3 4 5 Alberta's school boards and schools should have flexibility in deciding how many students are in each classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 Class size is less important than the composition and needs of students in the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 More training should be provided for teacher aides and assistants.

10. **What barriers or obstacles need to be overcome in order to achieve excellence in the classroom?**

The changing student

11. **Schools are expected to meet the needs of a diverse range of students in their classrooms.**
Circle 1 if you strongly agree and 5 if you strongly disagree with the following statements.
Circle 3 if you don't know or don't have a view on the issue.

1 2 3 4 5 Students, with severe special needs, should be included in the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 Classes with special needs students should be smaller than other classes.

1 2 3 4 5 More support should be provided for students and teachers in classes with special needs students.

1 2 3 4 5 Schools and teachers should have more support from social, health and community agencies in addressing the needs of students.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers need more support in assessing and addressing learning needs.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers need more support in addressing behaviour problems of students in school.

1 2 3 4 5 More needs to be done to address the needs of Aboriginal students and ensure that they achieve the same standards as other Alberta students.

1 2 3 4 5 Additional support should be provided for students who are new to Canada.

1 2 3 4 5 Students who are gifted or talented don't get the opportunities they need to achieve their potential.

12. What other things should be done in Alberta schools to address the diverse needs of students?

13. What should be done to address the needs of students who do not qualify for special needs funding but need more time and attention to address their needs?

Relevant and responsive curriculum

14. The content of what students learn in the classroom should be up to date and reflect changes in knowledge and in our society. **How important do you consider the following factors?**
Circle 1 if you think it is very important and 5 if you think it is not important.

1 2 3 4 5	Curriculum should anticipate the changing needs of the workforce and ensure that students are well-prepared.
1 2 3 4 5	Curriculum should be updated on a regular cycle so teachers know when the changes are coming.
1 2 3 4 5	Significant changes to the curriculum should be minimized.
1 2 3 4 5	The curriculum should focus on basic skills (reading, writing, social studies, science and mathematics).
1 2 3 4 5	There should be a limit on the number of optional courses provided.
1 2 3 4 5	The curriculum is overloaded and students are expected to cover too much in a year.
1 2 3 4 5	The curriculum is not challenging students enough.
1 2 3 4 5	Technology should be used as a tool to enhance the teaching and learning in all courses.
1 2 3 4 5	Learning second languages should be mandatory.
1 2 3 4 5	Physical education should be mandatory for all grades.
1 2 3 4 5	Life skills programs (e.g. managing finances, healthy lifestyles, human sexuality, etc.) should be mandatory.
1 2 3 4 5	Students should learn a greater appreciation for the arts and culture.
1 2 3 4 5	Students should learn more Canadian history.
1 2 3 4 5	Students should get a good understanding of other cultures and traditions.
1 2 3 4 5	Students should learn more about the environment and its impact on our province, country and the world.
1 2 3 4 5	Schools should have additional funding to purchase new texts and learning resources when new curriculum is introduced.

15. **What other things should be done to the curriculum to ensure that students in Alberta get the best education? What should be done to better prepare students for the impact of globalization and an increasingly inter-connected world?**

Smooth transitions

16. One of the important roles of schools is to prepare students for further education and the workforce. **What are the most important ways of ensuring smooth transitions from schools to post-secondary education and jobs?** Circle 1 if you think it is very important and 5 if you think it is not important to:

1 2 3 4 5 Help students make transitions from school to post-secondary education and on to their careers.

1 2 3 4 5 Encourage more students to begin trades training in school so they can continue on in apprenticeships.

1 2 3 4 5 Teach students the kinds of attitudes and skills they'll need in the workplace.

1 2 3 4 5 Provide mentorship programs (where students work with a successful individual in a particular career) and other approaches to expand students' awareness of different careers.

1 2 3 4 5 Encourage students to stay-in-school through innovative programs and approaches.

1 2 3 4 5 Expand partnerships between schools and business, industry and labour groups.

1 2 3 4 5 Take innovative approaches like schools in malls.

1 2 3 4 5 Encourage community members to be more involved in schools

17. What things need to be changed in the post-secondary system to enhance smooth transitions?

18. What steps should be taken to ensure that young children are ready for school when they enter Grade 1?

19. What should be done to ensure smooth transitions as students move from grade to grade? How should decisions be made about whether or not students move on to the next grade - based on age, based on their knowledge and skills, or based on a combination of factors?

Roles, responsibilities and governance

20. A number of issues have been raised about how our schools are governed and managed.
What do you think of the following ideas?
Circle 1 if you strongly agree and 5 if you strongly disagree.

1 2 3 4 5 The number of school boards should be reduced.

1 2 3 4 5 The relationship between the government, school boards, the Alberta Teachers' Association, principals, school councils, superintendents and teachers is unclear and needs to be reviewed.

1 2 3 4 5 Superintendents shouldn't have to be certified teachers as long as they are good managers and leaders.

1 2 3 4 5 Superintendents can be effective leaders without possessing a teaching certificate or without having been a teacher.

1 2 3 4 5 School principals should continue to be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

1 2 3 4 5 The role of school councils should be expanded.

21. **What other aspects of the current way schools are governed and managed should be addressed and what options would you suggest? What should be the roles and responsibilities of the provincial government, Alberta Teachers' Association, school boards, school councils, principals, superintendents and teachers?**

22. It's important to ensure that the education system is sustainable in the future. Resources are limited. **Should the following ideas be considered in terms of funding the education system?**
Circle 1 if you strongly agree and 5 if you strongly disagree.

1 2 3 4 5 School boards should be able to tax their local residents.

1 2 3 4 5 More funding should come from the province.

1 2 3 4 5 The province should put more priority on education and spend less in other areas.

1 2 3 4 5 New sources of revenue should be considered such as foundations where community members could contribute to support specific projects.

1 2 3 4 5 People should be prepared to pay more in taxes to support education.

1 2 3 4 5 Public-private partnerships should be considered as a way of paying for new schools.

1 2 3 4 5 Fund-raising should be limited to "extras" and not be used to cover the costs of operating the school or textbooks.

1 2 3 4 5 Schools should eliminate the 'frills', concentrate on the core essentials.

1 2 3 4 5 Extras should be funded by parents.

1 2 3 4 5 Schools should be more accountable for how they spend public funds.

1 2 3 4 5 All funding for education should come from the general revenues of the province.

1 2 3 4 5 Public and separate schools should share facilities in order to reduce costs of building new schools.

1 2 3 4 5 Additional funding should be provided to expand technology in schools.

23. If additional dollars were to be invested in Alberta's education system, decisions would need to be made on their allocation. **What percentage of any new funding would you invest to:**

___ Reduce the number of students in classrooms

___ Provide additional supports for special needs students

___ Enhance students' access to technology

___ Increase salaries and benefits for teachers and other school staff

___ Hire more teaching assistants

___ Provide schools with additional funding for resources like textbooks and enhanced school libraries

___ Increase access to counselling services in schools

___ Offer more supports to help students build numeracy skills

___ Offer more supports to help students build literacy skills

___ Provide additional resources to improve and address curriculum changes

___ Other

_____

_____

100%

24. **What other ideas do you have for funding education and making sure it is sustainable in the future?**

25. **What steps should be taken to reduce current and future inequities between rural and urban schools?**

Other issues

26. **What other issues or ideas should the Commission address as part of its review?**

These questions highlight just some of the issues and ideas that could be considered. We're interested in your ideas on the questions we posed, but also on any other ideas and issues you would like to explore. Check the Commission's website for additional information about the process, timelines, and activities.

Thanks for taking the time to participate in this important review.

About you

The following information is collected for statistical purposes only.
All responses will be treated as anonymous unless you chose to identify yourself.

Type of submission:

___ Organization ___ Individual

Name of organization (if applicable)

_____

What is your interest in education (taxpayer, parent, business owner, teacher, community organization/service group)

_____

_____

_____

Do you have children in Kindergarten to Grade 12 in Alberta? Yes No

Age

___ 18 and under
___ 19-24
___ 25-34
___ 35-44
___ 45-54
___ 55-64
___ 65-74
___ 75 and over

Submitting your Workbook

Please mail the completed questions section of the workbook to Alberta's Commission on Learning at the address below. The deadline for workbook submissions is December 6, 2002.

Alberta's Commission on Learning

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